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INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8598
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1567
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 6929
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 2918
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO 7627
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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SIPDIS

STATE FOR: WHA/MWELLS; WHA/PDA FOR JOHN DICKSON, CHARLOTTE PETERSON,
IIP/WHA FOR PETER COZZENS, LAC/SA FOR LAURA MCKECHNIE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KPAO PREL PHUM ECIN EAID PGOV CO

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S INAUGURATION RECEIVES BROAD,
ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT FROM COLOMBIANS

¶1. SUMMARY: Reaction to the Inauguration of President Obama as reflected by the extensive and very positive media coverage for the new administration, as well as comment from our contacts, has been uniformly positive in Colombia. President Uribe and numerous Colombian government officials have welcomed President Obama's inauguration and looked forward to continued close relations with the United States. The focus so far has been on how Colombia-U.S. relations might change, particularly in regards to human rights, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and U.S. assistance under Plan Colombia. The Ambassador hosted an Inauguration Day event at his residence on January 20, inviting a diverse group of over 200 guests to observe the swearing-in ceremony. End Summary.

¶2. In his January 23 remarks to the full diplomatic corps, President Alvaro Uribe stated that he viewed President Obama's inauguration with the most positive hopes and that he expected to maintain the great alliance between the United States and Colombia in the future. President Uribe continued that he hoped that Colombia could serve as a bridge to promote understanding between the United States and the region. Colombian cabinet and elected officials of all ranks have welcomed President Obama's inauguration both publicly and privately. Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, and Commerce Minister Luis Guillermo Plata expressed to the Ambassador in separate conversations their desire for close relations with Obama administration and desire to meet with their new respective counterparts in the near future.

¶3. Media coverage of Obama's Inauguration has been extensive and very positive. The President's inauguration headlined all major television, radio, and print media for a week. El Tiempo, the leading national daily, had front page coverage of Obama's Inauguration on January 20 and 21, with four full pages of coverage on the 21st that included coverage of Embassy Bogota's event. El Espectador, another leading Bogota daily, also had front page coverage on January 20 and 21, dedicating eight full pages on both days to Obama's Inauguration and his new administration. The January 21 edition of El Espectador also included a full page article on human rights in Colombia and a full page article on free trade under an Obama administration. Regionally, Cali's El País, Cartagena's El Universal, Medellin's El Colombiano, and Barranquilla's El Heraldo all dedicated front page coverage and several additional pages to Obama's Inauguration.

¶4. Editorials and Op-Eds in nearly all newspapers have been overwhelmingly positive. El Tiempo ran an editorial entitled "Historic Transition" about President Obama's inaugural speech stating "...something notably absent from the speech, with particular relevance for Colombia, was the word 'terrorism,' though

the concept itself was present." El Tiempo also ran an Op-Ed by French political scientist Olivier Escarguel entitled "The Obama Effect?" in which he stated, "Colombia's natural commitment to the war on drugs and the conflict with the FARC makes it a necessary ally. Whatever the decision might be regarding the FTA, Obama will continue with Plan Colombia's logical offensive." El Espectador ran an editorial about President Obama's first day in office commenting that the actions taken by him that very day sent clear messages, and it noted that the "honeymoon" between Colombia and Washington ended with Bush's departure; that Colombia will have to confront issues such as the "false positives" and labor unions more seriously and effectively; and, that this is the moment to start building a relationship under fundamentally different rules. It concluded by saying that, "In the end, this could be very good news for the sad state of human rights in Colombia." Cali's El Pais carried an editorial entitled "President of Hope" which stated in part, "The sharp contrast between the humility Obama projected in his speech and the pomp and ceremony that went with his inauguration sent a resounding message to the world and to the Americans themselves: that nation continues to be a powerful one, whose new president is prepared to right the wrongs of the past."

¶ 15. Media coverage has continued to be extensive and has remained uniformly positive since the inauguration. It has largely focused on how relations between Colombia and the U.S. may change, the role that human rights will play, the chances for passage in the U.S. Congress of the pending FTA, and the future of Plan Colombia. Colombian commentators have supported President Obama's initial steps to close the detainee facility at Guantanamo and his visit to the State Department as a sign of a new direction in U.S. foreign policy.

¶ 16. On January 20, the Ambassador hosted a reception at his residence in celebration of the inauguration of President Obama. More than 200 guests from the Government of Colombia, local and international NGOs, the private sector, academia, the media, the Afro-Colombian community and the Embassy attended. Attendees included the President of the Supreme Court Francisco Ricaurte, the Vice Minister for Defense Sergio Jaramillo, Vice Minister of Interior Maria Isabel Nieto, Senate Vice President Oscar Suarez, Mayor of Cartagena Judith Pinedo, President of Banco de la Republica Jose Uribe, the President of the Council of American Enterprises, the Director of the National Association of Afro-Colombian Mayors, and the Director of the Colombo-American Center, among others.

¶ 17. Likely Presidential candidate Rodrigo Rivera also told us the entire Colombian political class was ready to express support for the incoming administration. Accion Social, the presidential agency responsible for social programs for vulnerable populations, told us that they were anxious to learn about how the U.S.- Colombia relationship would change - especially in terms of security and other forms of assistance. They added that they were pleased to see such a strong turnout of Afro-Colombian leaders at the Ambassador's event because it gave them an opportunity to network and discuss specific programs.

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